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TAGS: PHUM PGOV KDEM KPAO RS

SUBJECT: HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVIST AND THREE JOURNALISTS BEATEN
IN INGUSHETIA

Classified By: Political Counselor Alice G. Wells for reason 1.4(d).

¶1. (C) Summary: In the Ingushetia capital of Nazran on November 24, masked gunmen abducted a human rights worker and three Moscow television journalists from their hotel rooms, robbed them of their equipment and notebooks, and threatened them with execution. The gunmen then took the four victims to a field where they severely beat them and left them without clothes or shoes in sub-freezing temperatures. The attacks may have been intended to seize footage of an Ingushetia special forces operation that resulted in a boy's death, or to prevent the journalists from covering demonstrations scheduled for later that day in Nazran. The regional government first dismissed the account of the abduction as fabricated until the President of Ingushetia announced that he was taking personal control of the investigation. Following demands from human rights activists, Chairwoman of the President's Human Rights Council Ella Pamfilova stepped in. End summary.

Abduction and Beating

¶2. (C) Shortly after midnight on November 24, five masked gunmen burst into the hotel rooms of Oleg Orlov, a member of the human rights group Memorial, and three Moscow-based television journalists. The journalists work for national television channel REN-TV's news program "24," and were meeting in one hotel room to plan the next day's coverage of the demonstrations in Nazran against recent human rights abuses in Ingushetia. Orlov wrote in a statement to police that the gunmen had asked why Orlov and the journalists had come to Nazran, and then seized all of their possessions (including computers, cameras, phones, and notebooks). The gunmen then placed black plastic bags over the men's' heads, led them to a van, and then drove them on backroads for more than an hour. During the trip, the gunmen accused them (in unaccented Russian) of transporting explosives into Ingushetia. Upon arriving at a field near the Chechen border, the gunmen pulled the men out of the van and threatened to shoot them. The gunmen then stripped the men down to their underwear, forced them to lie on the ground, and then kicked and stomped them, breaking the jaw of one journalist. The gunmen then left, and the men walked to the nearest village.

¶3. (C) The police in the village drove the men to the police in Nazran, where police took their statements. Orlov was released by noon, in time to monitor the demonstrations in Nazran's main square, but the journalists were held for questioning at the police station for 18 hours with no access to medical assistance until after the protest of 300 demonstrators had been violently dispersed by the security services. One journalist with head injuries was hospitalized upon his return to Moscow and is not expected to be released

for ten days.

Local Reaction

¶4. (C) The region's interior ministry (MVD) issued a statement that stories of the attack were untrue, and that "this provocative insinuation is a political trick to discredit the public image of the administration." Soon after it became clear that this story was becoming a public relations problem, Ingushetia President Murat Zyazikov announced that he would personally oversee the investigation.

According to Orlov, President Zyazikov personally apologized to the journalists (but not to Orlov), saying that "destructive forces" were active in the Republic, and that his own family members had been kidnapped in the past.

¶5. (C) On November 28, REN-TV Deputy Director Maksim Troepolskiy told us that the REN-TV crew had been in Nazran to film the Dissenters March on November 24, and had earlier filmed Ingushetia Special Forces (Spetsnats) storming a building. The crew filmed the operation in which a six year-old boy was accidentally killed by a ricochet. As the boy's mother turned towards the Spetsnats soldiers with her arms out, they shot at her feet and legs. Troepolskiy said that the crew managed to ship some of the footage back to Moscow, but that most of it was confiscated by the masked gunmen during the hotel room raid.

¶6. (C) The prosecutor in Ingushetia has opened investigations into "interfering with the legal professional activities of a journalist," "illegal entry into living quarters with the intent of violence," and "theft," instead of assault and kidnapping.

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The Human Rights Community Reacts

¶7. (SBU) In an open appeal to Human Rights Ombudsman Vladimir Lukin and to Chairwoman of the President's Human Rights Council Ella Pamfilova, the members of the President's Council on Civil Society and Human Rights and the members of the Expert Committee on Upholding Human Rights have requested a federal investigation into the attack and into the action of the Ingushetia authorities. The signatories, which included Svetlana Gannushkina, Sergey Kovalev, Lyudmila Alekseyeva, Aleksey Simonov, and others, complained that the local prosecutor was failing to investigate such obvious charges as kidnapping, attempted murder, and battery. They also noted that the prosecutors should be investigating "robbery" not "theft" since the materials had been taken at gunpoint.

¶8. (SBU) On November 27, Ella Pamfilova requested permission from Prosecutor General Yuriy Chaika to take over the investigation. (Note: It is not clear what Pamfilova's request means, as her office has no legal authority to conduct investigations.) On Radio Svoboda, Pamfilova expressed alarm over increasing violence against journalists.

In a public statement, Pamfilova called on federal and regional authorities to restrain themselves "and to prevent lower levels of government from taking illegal and arbitrary administrative measures against citizens, including placing restrictions on rallies, marches and demonstrations, limiting freedom of expression, infringing upon the rights of citizens to receive comprehensive and reliable information, as well as impeding journalists in performing their professional duties."

Speculation on Culprits and Motives, But No Proof

¶ 9. (C) REN-TV's Troepolskiy suspects that Ingush Spetsnats were behind the attack in response to the REN-TV filming of their operation. An episode of "24" that aired on November 28 contained footage shot on November 23rd that showed massive damage to a bullet-riddled home in Ingushetia and a photo of the boy who was killed. Troepolskiy provided us a copy of a letter sent to REN-TV by the People's Congress of Ingushetia, which also blamed "destructive forces aimed at destabilizing the region" and promised a full investigation under the control of President Zyazikov to bring the guilty parties to justice. The letter added that this incident was probably provoked by REN-TV's negative coverage of Ingushetia, and concluded by asking that REN-TV cease its "biased reports on events in the region."

¶ 10. (C) Memorial's Gregoriy Shvedov told us he believes that federal forces carried out the attack, "based on the professionalism of the operation and because the gunmen spoke unaccented Russian," but that it was not clear who ordered it. Shvedov linked the attack to the pending coverage of the November 24 demonstrations and noted that the federal authorities have a strong interest in preventing the precedent of a local movement ousting an unpopular leader. If federal forces were involved, Shvedov added, they would have needed to coordinate with the local authorities to remove the local security forces from their posts at the hotel. Shvedov said that the immediate goal of not having the demonstration or its dispersement televised had been met, and that with the national focus on the Duma elections, it was unlikely that the investigation would result in anything.

¶ 11. (C) Aleksey Simonov of the Glasnost Defense Foundation told us that the abduction and beatings were not connected to the local elections, but instead were aimed at preventing Ingushetia "from becoming another Chechnya." Simonov noted that the Congress of Ingush people scheduled for early 2008 is going to be held outside of the republic because they cannot get permission to hold it inside the republic. He added that the Kremlin was trying to create an information vacuum about negative events in Ingushetia. Peter Orlov, NTV news director, told us that all the news channels had been warned by the authorities to "stay away from Ingushetia."

Comment

¶ 12. (C) This brazen and violent attack against Moscow-based television journalists was certain to make national news. The military style of the attack, and the existence of a plausible motive strongly suggest involvement by local or federal authorities, and possibly both. Pamfilova's public

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statements raised the profile of the case and her willingness to head the investigation show both the seriousness with which this attack is viewed and Pamfilova's skepticism about the ability of the prosecutor general's to get to the bottom of it.

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